

History of Colonial Settlement

Documentary records provide clues concerning the earliest period of significant settlement in what is now Stokes County. Tax lists, land grants and deeds, the 1784-1787 state census, Moravian records, the survival of many houses believed to have been built in the 1780's, and the dates of county formation in the northwest North Carolina suggest that the most intensive settlement of Stokes County took place in the third quarter of the eighteenth century. Settlement before that time was very sparse, perhaps due to the lingering effects of the 1705-1715 Indian war that took place in the western Piedmont. After the American Revolution the settlement of the county seemed to occur at a steady pace. Many of the names listed in the 1784-1787 census are still present in Stokes County or at least remained evident for a century or more (Phillips 1989).

The majority of the settlers probably were from the counties of the Piedmont of Virginia, though many were from Pennsylvania and other Mid-Atlantic colonies. The eighteenth-century road, commonly known as "the Great Wagon Road" which led from Pennsylvania into western North Carolina, ran through the eastern part of Stokes and was the means by which the early settlers arrived in the county.

The majority of the first settlers appear to have been made up of English immigrants, although there were also Germans, Scotch, Irish and a few other groups represented. While the family names which survive from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries attest to the presence and of these ethnic groups, the records of the early churches and businesses provide a strong impression of the predominance of those people were of English descent. Although the primary religious presence in the earliest years of the county was Moravian, their influence and major settlements were concentrated in the Wachovia Tract in the southern half of the 1789 county. This portion of the county split off in 1849 to form Forsyth County. Moravian and Lutheran churches, both historically associated with those of German ancestry, were not present in the county until the 1890's. A Friends (Quaker) Church was formed in the northwest section of the county in 1880. Two Presbyterian churches, generally linked to the Scotch-Irish, were recorded in the 1850 census, but later disappeared. Instead, it was the Methodist and Baptist (primarily Primitive Baptist), of English ancestry, which proliferated in the county during the nineteenth century. Other denominations appeared toward the end of the century, but the Methodist and Baptist congregations dominated in Stokes. Their churches remain the most numerous in the county today.

In 1770 Surry County was formed from Rowan and included the present-day counties of Surry, Yadkin, Stokes and Forsyth. Less than two decades later Stokes was formed from Surry, suggesting a substantial increase in settlement in the area during that short time. At that time Stokes County included all of present-day Forsyth County, with the bulk of the population in the southern half of the county around the Moravian town of Salem. In 1790 Germanton was established as the county seat. It was laid out from a tract of land that was approximately in the center of the county and is now the dividing line between Stokes and Forsyth Counties. Stokes